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Socially Responsible Journalism - The Kerala Model

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Abstract

Though the Indian diaspora is scattered all over the world, the GCC countries have a remarkably high presence of Indian expatriates. The number of Non Resident Indians or NRIs in the GCC alone is an astounding six million (Shamnad, 2011). Unlike in the US, UK, Canada and other favourite NRI destinations, NRIs in the GCC countries are mainly from the southern Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu with Kerala the main contributor. The favoured destination for Keralites in the Arabian Gulf is the UAE. In 2007 42 percent of emigrants from Kerala chose to work in the UAE (Zachariah and Rajan, 2007). Along with the states of Punjab and Gujarat, Kerala has for centuries engaged in trade with far-away lands. In the early 20th century there was a considerable influx into Ceylon and Malaysia. Most of the emigrants were semi-skilled workers who picked up jobs in tea and rubber plantations. In the mid 1970s the Arabian Gulf emerged as a favourite destination for job seekers. Professionals - especially nurses, teachers, doctors and IT specialists - from Kerala have sought occupation in Germany, US, UK and various African countries for decades (Samuel, 2011). The

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Introduction

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The Kerala Model

The reasons for the high migration from Kerala are many. Kerala is a small strip of land on the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent accounting for only one percent of the total area of the country yet supporting a massive population of 31.8 million - about three percent of India's total population with the highest population density in the country (Prokerala.com, 2011). Kerala stands very high on human development indices in spite of comparatively low incomes and GDP. This anomaly has been termed the Kerala Model.

Richard W. Franke, an American sociologist who studied the social situation in Kerala, presented interesting findings in 2003 comparing Kerala with the United States based on life indicators. Franke points out that though the per capita GDP of Kerala is only \$566 and that of the US is \$34,260, the life expectancy for a North American male is 74, while the life expectancy for a Keralite male is 68. Kerala's birth rate is an estimated 17 per thousand compared with 16 per thousand in the United States. Adult literacy in Kerala is also comparable to the US (Franke 2003). In 1991 the United Nations certified Kerala as 100 percent literate (McKibben 2011). Density of population, high literacy, and exposure to foreign lands all account for the increased emigration from Kerala.

Media consumption

High media consumption in the state can be traced to the high literacy rates. Malayalam vernacular dailies like the *Malayala Manorama* and *Mathrubhoomi* enjoy circulations that are the highest in the country. More than 12 television channels vie for air space. The presence of Malayalam media abroad is phenomenal as are the contributions of non-Keralites to the state's media. The first Malayalam daily *Malayala Panchangam* was published in 1846 by the German scholar, Dr Herman Gundert (Manalil 2003). The first Malayalam television channel Asianet is now part of the Murdoch empire.

Most Malayalam print and television media have Gulf editions catering to the diaspora in the GCC. This has been a boon mainly for the men, so-called bachelors, who live away from their families, visiting them, if lucky, once in two years for a month. This forced fragmentation of families has led to many social problems both for those languishing at home and those pursuing their dream on foreign soil. One such social problem has been termed the Gulf wife syndrome - the malaise that affects women whose husbands are in the Gulf for extended periods of time.

Keralites in the Gulf

The situation of Keralite workers in the Gulf is different from that of the diaspora elsewhere. A majority are unskilled and illiterate who work as drivers, cooks, gardeners, construction laborers, and so on. Many pay hefty amounts averaging over AED 10,000 – for a work visa for jobs that pay them AED 500 per month. (AED 3.67 = USD 1.) This money is often raised from loan sharks or by selling/pawning family property. The onus is on the worker to return the money, and it becomes a noose around his neck. Even when working conditions are not suitable, and salary is unpaid, many are forced to continue toiling because of the fear of going back empty handed.

These men are easily exploited. Ignorance of local law also works against them, and many are incarcerated for known or unknown offenses. Some are isolated in farms hundreds of kilometres away from civilisation forced to work in unfamiliar surroundings under the scorching desert sun. For Keralite workers, this is an added challenge as the small state boasts 44 rivers, placid backwaters, two copious monsoons which bring 3000 mm of rain every year, and lush greenery. Many workers are cheated by their own kin and have nowhere to turn to. Some abscond from their employers and remain illegally in the country unable to travel home.

World of Expats – *Pravasalokam*

Social and financial pressures have contributed to the disappearance of workers of both genders. Financial constraints of families limit the efficacy of their search, and many are separated from loved ones forever. Help from the Indian government and social welfare agencies is inadequate. It is this wide chasm that the television program *Expat World* or *Pravasalokam* tries to fill. The program was one of the first to be aired after the launch of the Kairali TV channel in 2000. Kairali was a venture of the Communist party which was popular in the state mainly among the working class. In fact, Kerala had the first democratically elected Communist government in the world. Among Kairali's shareholders are some 250,000 ordinary workers, half of them from the Gulf region (Kairali TV, 2010).

Rafiq Rawther, the current director of the program, conceived of a 30-minute series introducing prominent Keralites who live in the Gulf. As the episodes unrolled, a team of nonresident Keralites brought to the channel's notice the plight of Kunju Mohammed who had sold one of his kidneys for AED2000. His story moved viewers, and the man was offered a visa and work. The success of this episode spawned many compassionate requests from the community in Kerala, most seeking information about missing relatives. The socially marginalized were featured on *Pravasalokam*, now an example of social activism in Indian television.

The presenter of the programme is P.T. Kunhi Mohammed. He has lived in the UAE and is familiar with the social milieu. He is also an acclaimed film director, actor, and scriptwriter who was twice elected to Kerala's legislative assembly. In each episode, Mohammed talks to the families of missing persons and reconstructs the story of their lives. On the screen a photo of the missing person plays for five minutes while words with details in English scroll. Contact details of volunteers in various parts of the GCC are also provided. The program airs during prime time on Thursday evenings. Since the weekend in most GCC countries runs from Friday to Saturday, Thursday evening is the start of the weekend. In the early years it was a half hour phone-in-program, but now it has become a one- hour show where families plead with their loved ones to contact them and talk about their hardship. Kunhi Mohammed's difficult job sees him in a variety of roles as mediator, supporter, comforter, and anchor all in one.

Here is a typical segment as reported at The Hindu.com, 2011.

An old, ailing mother, sitting in a television studio at Thiruvananthapuram, goes on air letting the world know that her middle-aged daughter is missing in Saudi Arabia. Naseema, poor and divorced, had left for Saudi Arabia 12 years back to work as a housemaid, leaving her two children in her mother's custody. She used to send money until two years before, but never visited home in the past 12 years. And, for two years, there has been no word from her. Apparently, someone else is in control of her life. The old woman, amid sobs, says she just wants to see her daughter once before she dies and hand back the children. "Could anyone help me find my daughter?" The anchor of the TV programme — filmmaker and former MLA P.T. Kunhi Mohammed — steps in and asks the Keralite viewers in the Gulf region to help trace Naseema. The television screen scrolls the phone numbers of the programme's representatives in the Gulf countries so that anyone having any information about Naseema could call. Then Mr. Kunhi Mohammed makes a direct request to Naseema (in case she happens to watch the programme): "Please let us know if you are alive. If you are in trouble we can help you out. If you have lost your passport, we can help you get a new one and we can also get you an air ticket to return home."

Hundreds of families have had the joy of locating loved ones in the past 11 years. Viewers of the 550 plus episodes have witnessed lives and communities changing forever. Missing people have been located in prisons, hospitals, desolate farms, and even brothels. Some had been missing for over three decades and were not recognized by their family. The success of the program has generated cries for help from other states in India and also from countries like Singapore. The number of requests keeps mounting, and the channel has limited the search to those who have gone missing in the past two years only.

Typically, two cases are aired every week though around 20 requests are received. The program also gives financial aid to the needy and sponsors the education of children whose parents are missing. The success of the program can be attributed to the dedicated volunteers and activists who lead the man hunt. The wide viewership of the channel in the GCC is also a favourable factor. Many viewers have been surprised to find that a friend they have known for years is a missing person or that he/she has another family back home. Ordinary viewers are as much stalwarts of the cause as the committed volunteers.

Catalyst for change

Pravasalokam's contribution has also been to bring social awareness in Kerala about the dangers of falling prey to illegal job and visa agents. Advertisements run in various media to educate people about the rules to be followed when taking a job abroad. Prospective candidates are also advised to process their applications only through government-approved agencies.

The Indian government now has a dedicated ministry for overseas workers that champions them. In 2003 a compulsory insurance scheme, the *Pravasi Bharatiya Bima Yojana*, was implemented for migrant workers. "Under the 2003 regulations, all entitled workers receive a minimum insurance cover of INR200,000 for death or disability; INR50,000 in the event of accident or sickness; and INR20,000 maternity coverage, among others" (Asian Migrant Centre 2005).

Programs like *Pravasalokam* have helped to expose the harsh realities of living in the Gulf. The flaunting of wealth by nouveau riche Keralites created unrealistic expectations about work and life in the GCC. Many of the expatriates rescued by *Pravasalokam* were domestic workers. In recognition of this effort the creators of the program were invited to witness the passing of historic legislation by the ILO during the Geneva conference in June 2010.

The amendment asserted that "domestic workers around the world who care for families and households, must have the same basic labour rights as those available to other workers: reasonable hours of work, weekly rest of at least 24 consecutive hours, a limit on in-kind payment, clear information on terms and conditions of employment, as well as respect for fundamental principles and rights at work including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining" (ILO.org 2011). Interestingly, many member nations of the United Nations including India with six million listed domestic workers lobbied against the amendment.

Inspiring others

The success of *Pravasalokam* has spawned several similar programs on Kerala's airwaves. Malayala Manorama television now runs a program to find loved ones lost in the country. Amrita TV in association with the state's legal cell provides free legal advice to the marginalized who approach the channel with civil suits. The Australian TV program *Find My Family* which has aired on Seven Network since 26 August 2008 has a similar theme. In the US We TVs *The Locator* began broadcasting in 2008 and has helped to reunite families. The example of *Pravasalokam* may inspire other media into providing social empowerment.

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